

3-1-1932

An Adventure in Faith

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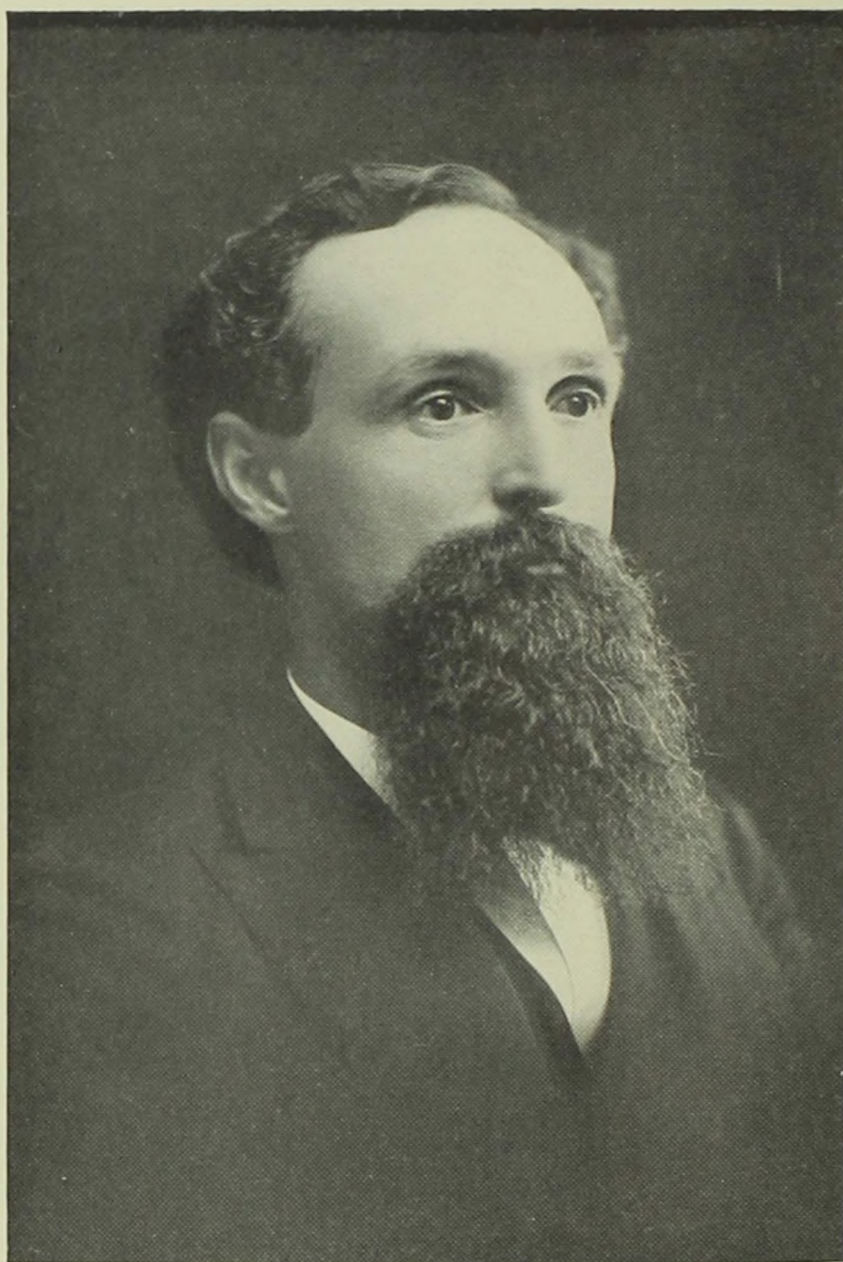
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Recommended Citation

Gallaher, Ruth A. "An Adventure in Faith." *The Palimpsest* 13 (1932), 93-105.

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COURTESY OF H. R. LEMEN

JOSEPH G. LEMEN

THE PALIMPSEST

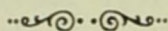
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XIII

ISSUED IN MARCH 1932

NO. 3

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An Adventure in Faith

One Sunday morning in December, 1882, Reverend Joseph G. Lemen, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa, preached a sermon on temperance. To illustrate the evils growing out of the use of intoxicating liquor, the young minister told the story of the drunkard who had committed suicide in that city some months earlier, leaving his widow and six children destitute.

Although he had told the story to emphasize his temperance sermon, and not as an appeal for relief, Reverend Lemen felt a sudden impulse to ask for a collection to assist the widow, but this would have been unusual and irregular, and he put the idea aside. The service continued and the minister stood with his hand uplifted for the benediction, when he suddenly decided to obey the inner voice. He dropped his hand and announced that the congregation would be given an opportu-

nity to help the needy family. The response was so generous that Reverend Lemen had sufficient funds to provide for the most pressing needs of the widow's family and to help several other poor families as well.

As he was on his way home the next day from this mission of charity, Reverend Lemen met a reporter from the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* who wanted the story for his paper. After some discussion the newspaper man suggested that he put in the paper an announcement that the minister would be in his study each morning from ten to twelve to receive donations for the poor and hear pleas for assistance. The pastor demurred; the plan would interfere seriously with his sermons and his parish work. He finally agreed, however, and thus unintentionally and rather unwillingly began a work which has continued ever since.

Times were hard in the winter of 1882 and high water had driven many poor families from their homes. In a short time the pastor's relief work came to be a major industry. The chapel of the First Baptist Church was soon open from seven o'clock in the morning until ten at night. One day a partially intoxicated man walked into the room and insisted that Reverend Lemen take charge of his three young daughters. The mother was dead, he said, and he was too much addicted

to drink to be a fit guardian for his own children. The minister explained that he had no facilities for caring for children although the church could and would render assistance, but the man declared that this would not do. If the minister and the church would not take the children, they must go to the poorhouse.

Unwilling to turn the children away, Reverend Lemen agreed to take the little girls who were motherless and almost worse than fatherless, although he had at the time no idea as to what provision he could make for them. For a time they were cared for in the Lemen home. Later Reverend Lemen rented a small house, on his own responsibility, and installed the children there with a matron to take care of them. Soon other destitute children were brought in and almost before they realized what had happened the minister and his wife had an orphanage on their hands.

Before we tell the story of this children's home, let us introduce the founders. Both Reverend and Mrs. Lemen were born in Salem, Illinois, in the year 1848, and were therefore just past thirty-four years of age. Mrs. Lemen had been Florence Hagee, the daughter of wealthy and cultured parents. Later the family moved away from Salem, and it was upon the occasion of a visit to the home town that Florence, then a black-haired,

blue-eyed young woman, met Joseph G. Lemen, who had just graduated from the Harvard Law School and was beginning the practice of law. It was not surprising that the two became attracted to each other, and in 1871 they were married.

The future seemed to promise ease and distinction. For a time Joseph Lemen continued his law practice and also edited a newspaper, but the religious background of the Lemen family made him increasingly dissatisfied with his profession. After debating the question for some time, and discussing it with his wife, the young lawyer suddenly announced that he was discontinuing his law practice. He attended a theological seminary, known as Shurtleff College, and upon graduation entered the Baptist ministry. Mrs. Lemen joined in the new life cheerfully, although it meant privations and hardships instead of the ease to which she had been accustomed. In 1881, the Lemens came to the Council Bluffs Baptist Church, bringing with them their three children, one child having died in infancy. The future again looked promising, for Reverend Lemen was known as a good preacher and a successful pastor. But again the hand of fate pointed to another path.

On March 16, 1883, the "Council Bluffs Home of the Friendless Association" was incorporated under the laws of Iowa. Its purpose was the sup-

port of the children's home already begun by Reverend Lemen. According to the articles of incorporation, the property of the Association must always be used as a home for orphan and destitute children, irrespective of church affiliations or State lines. Such property could neither be mortgaged nor sold. Eleven years later, on January 13, 1894, the articles of incorporation were renewed. This time the name was given as the "Christian Home Association of Council Bluffs, Iowa". The institution is frequently referred to as the Christian Home Orphanage.

The Christian Home was founded on the faith of Reverend and Mrs. Lemen that God would provide for its needs. Its motto has always been "Endowed with His Promises". It has never received any support from public funds nor is it officially connected with any particular church, lodge, or society. It has only one trust fund and no revenue-producing property. During the nearly fifty years of its existence, the Home has depended solely upon the contributions sent in by individuals, churches, clubs, Sunday school classes, and groups of various kinds. To maintain an institution of this kind with an average daily enrollment of some two hundred inmates by means of casual contributions received from day to day is indeed a test of faith.

At first Reverend Lemen, busy pastor as he was, made trips to surrounding towns to solicit aid for the orphanage. To aid him in getting the needs of the Home before the public, he began the publication of a small paper, the *Christian Home*. The first issue was dated October 2, 1884, and since that time it has appeared regularly semi-monthly. This paper is the mouthpiece of the Home. It contains information concerning the Home, appeals for assistance, and long lists of contributors, sometimes including the letters which accompany the donations.

Aside from this paper, the Christian Home does little soliciting for funds. It sends out no financial agents and has, therefore, little overhead expense in the matter of obtaining funds. Friends are relied upon to make known the needs of the orphanage.

During the first two years of the Home's existence, Reverend Lemen retained his pastorate and the care of the orphanage was entrusted to persons employed for that purpose. This plan was not satisfactory, however, and in 1885, Reverend Lemen resigned his pastorate and the Lemens moved to the site of the orphanage, building for themselves a frame house with their own funds and partly by their own labor. This house was later deeded to the institution.

For almost twenty years this couple devoted themselves to the care of the needy. Mrs. Lemen washed and scrubbed, baked and sewed, for the children in the Home as well as for her own children. At one time typhoid developed in the institution and Mrs. Lemen assumed the responsibility for the care of seventeen of the sick children in addition to that of her own daughter who also contracted the disease. During the same years, Reverend Lemen carried the financial burdens of the growing and always needy institution. It was, indeed, a strenuous life and it is not surprising that these two people, whose faith, courage, and sacrifice made up the foundations of the Christian Home, died at a comparatively early age, Mrs. Lemen on September 10, 1902, and Reverend Lemen two years later.

The site of the Christian Home Orphanage occupies about three city blocks in the heart of Council Bluffs. As the years have passed various buildings have been added, until at present the plant is valued at some \$300,000. The chapel and schoolhouse, a small frame building, formerly belonged to the Berean Baptist Church of Council Bluffs. When the congregation of this church disbanded, the building was moved to the site of the orphanage.

The first brick building was completed in 1903.

It was a two-story structure, sixty by one hundred and twenty-eight feet, and contains the main dining room and the dormitory for the larger girls. The dining room will seat two hundred and fifty persons. This building was made possible by a donation from a prominent citizen of Iowa who has refused to permit his name to be made public. On its cornerstone are the words, GIFT OF LOVE FROM A FRIEND, "IN HIS NAME". A Memorial Building, which houses the babies and the small boys, was erected in 1905 in honor of Reverend and Mrs. J. G. Lemen, the founders of the Home. Funds were donated by friends of the institution.

The building for large boys, the office building, and the heating plant and laundry were made possible by a bequest from Mrs. Mary E. Robinson of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The boys' building, completed in 1907, contains, in addition to the dormitory for the larger boys, departments for aged women and crippled and deformed children, a gymnasium, and a carpenter shop. The latest of the brick buildings, the Nurses' Home, was erected in 1913 with money raised by a system of group pledges. About \$10,000 of the amount was raised in Council Bluffs. This building also houses some of the adult inmates.

The Christian Home is, at present, administered by a board of seven trustees, which fills its own

vacancies. Mr. H. R. Lemen, one of the sons of the founder of the Home, acts as general manager, secretary, and treasurer. Another son, D. P. Lemen, is a member of the board of trustees. The superintendent is Mrs. Walter Stephan, a woman of unusual ability in handling children, the only mother many of these children have known. She has charge of all the inmates — children, old people, and afflicted persons — and supervises the reception and placing of children.

The Christian Home, like all institutions for the care and placing of children, is under the supervision of the State Board of Control and makes monthly reports to the Board concerning the children received in the Home, those who have died, and those placed in homes. The placing of children in private homes outside of Iowa and the reception of children from other States must be approved by the Iowa Superintendent of Child Welfare.

Children are received from any part of the United States, but about seventy-five per cent are from Iowa. Occasionally, dependent or neglected children are committed to the Home by juvenile courts, usually after a conference between representatives of the Home, the judge, and the guardian of the child. The institution, however, is in no sense a reform school. In its earlier years the Home cared for many physically and

mentally handicapped children, but since more institutions have been provided for such children, the officers of the Home prefer to receive only those who are fitted to attend the regular grade school maintained on the grounds. Approximately 25,000 children have been cared for at the Home since its founding.

During the year 1931, 238 children and 14 destitute mothers and grandmothers were received in the institution and homes were found for 139 children and five women. There have been no deaths in the Home during the past ten years, although many of the children are sick or undernourished when received. Four children from the Home graduated from the Council Bluffs High School in 1931 and two from college.

A few afflicted persons received as children are still inmates of the Home. Years ago a blind boy was admitted. Later he was sent to Vinton where he was taught rug weaving. For some years he was able to maintain himself, but hard times lessened his earnings, and he now finds a refuge in the only home he has ever known.

The institution does not, however, plan to keep children indefinitely. About 60 per cent of those received are returned to parents or relatives, 15 per cent are placed in foster homes for adoption, one per cent, chiefly older children, are placed in

homes on agreement, and only the remaining 24 per cent are kept longer than a year. Unlike most child-placing homes, however, the Christian Home Orphanage does not separate brothers and sisters. If the family is too large to find a foster home, an effort is made to place the children in homes where the people are related or so closely associated that the adopted children will have an opportunity to grow up together. If this can not be done, the entire family is kept in the Home.

The secretary of the Home writes as follows of this problem: "It is not difficult to provide for the children who are released to us for adoption. We always have some very excellent homes on our waiting list, so it is always possible for us to place children, who are for adoption, in excellent homes. This is especially true of the children under seven years of age, whether they have red hair and freckles, or not. We have many applications for two children, or for twins. Now, more than ever before, childless couples are making an effort to complete their homes, and fill their lives by taking a little child, or children, into their homes. This is true of people in all walks of life — professional people, teachers, lawyers, writers, retired farmers, unmarried women; and we received a most unusual application from a prominent writer — an unmarried man. He wanted to give a bright boy

the educational opportunity he wanted to have and for which he had to work, after he was grown."

Many children, on the other hand, are left in the home by parents or relatives who are perhaps temporarily unable to care for them, yet are unwilling to give them up for adoption. In some cases a mother is received in the home with her family of small children. Occasionally a grandmother is admitted with her dependent grandchildren. A number of elderly women who are without other means of support are also cared for at the Home.

The letters from families asking aid are often pathetic. What tragedies they reveal — stories of fathers and mothers who are dead, sick, in prison, out of work, or too subnormal to be able to support their families. Wherever possible, such families are admitted temporarily and an effort is made to reestablish their home. Sometimes the father or some relative can be located and compelled or persuaded to provide for the children. In time, the children get old enough to assist the mother in supporting the family.

To care for this assortment of dependents requires a well-organized institution and a considerable outlay of money. The Christian Home now maintains its own laundry, hospital, school, and

church, in addition to housing and feeding its inmates. There is also a band. Expenditures must be governed by the donations which come in. If the funds are low children seeking admission must be turned away.

For the year 1931 the total expenditures of the Christian Home Association were listed at slightly more than \$131,800. Food cost some \$14,000, heat and light \$9600, and clothing \$1350. The comparatively small expenditures for food and clothing are explained by the long lists of donations of such articles published in each issue of the Home paper.

Gifts to the orphanage during 1931 totalled \$105,954. These gifts came not from Iowa alone but from many parts of the United States. The deficit is due to the fact that in times of depression receipts of institutions dependent on private charity tend to fall off, while demands for assistance, of course, increase. It has so far been paid by using a surplus fund invested in securities and certificates, but this has been almost exhausted. Those in charge of the Home peer anxiously at the meal and the oil, and now, as in other times, they scrape the bottom, but the adventure in faith goes on.

RUTH A. GALLAHER